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ABSTRACT

Word recognition should not be separated from obtaining word meaning or comprehension. The first task of the teacher is to see that the child can handle spoken words adequately. Word mastery begins with learning basic labelling and categorization skills through experience with concrete objects; proceeds to learning words for actions, discriminations, and more abstract concepts such as time and location; and finally progresses through guided vocabulary development to learning words about words. The emphasis should be on consolidating and extending the child's oral vocabularies, on speaking in sentences, and on acquiring a respect for inflections. Then the child can be guided to learn the capabilities of language by reading and writing. While at first it might be necessary to tolerate substandard communication, the goal should remain precise, lucid exchange and evaluation of ideas through speech and reading. Separation of communication into listening, speaking, reading, and writing may be useful for reading teachers, but it is harmful to total language development. Word meaning cannot be learned in isolation; it begins with mastery of simple skills on the oral level and proceeds to increasingly more complex skills. (AW)

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DEVELOPING COMPREHENSION

THROUGH

WORD RECOGNITION SKILLS

(This paper is one of two presentations scheduled for Thursday, April 22, 1971, from 4:00 to 5:00 pm in room H of Convention Hall)

I am sure that all of you have been approached at some time by the parent who tells you, "my child has a reading problem." Before you would venture to comment, you undoubtedly tried to find out the nature of the problem. "Does the child have trouble with words, or with understanding what he reads," you probably asked, as if one was possible without the other. What I propose to do this afternoon is to break down the dichotomy between the "decoding" and the "comprehension" aspects of reading; and to break up the "word recognition" aspects of reading into factual and inferential skills, extrapolation (figuring out what happened before and after the ma-

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terial was presented), and appreciation. I would like you to see reading as a continuum rather than as a picket fence, and to see a reading problem as any situation wherein the reader lacks any of the skills needed to grasp the meaning and purpose of the written material.

If the reader doesn't even understand the words he reads, obviously he is not reading any more than I would be reading as I examine a page from Pravda. And if he knows the words but can't understand the meaning of what he reads, he is wasting his time and will soon stop. In fact, the second problem is perhaps more dangerous than the first because the reader might think that because he knows the words, he knows what the article is all about, and this could be disasterous.

We also know that relatively few non-readers are totally dyslexic-- most of the problem readers we deal with know their names, their streets, and a few words of English, at least. Most are able to carry out simple directions, conduct conversations, and otherwise express themselves. Perhaps they don't do this as often as they should, or perhaps they use a sub-standard dialect, but they communicate all the same. It is this very thing that causes such frustration to parents and teachers-- the child has no difficulty with spoken language, why can't he read? (I realize that I am by-passing the severely retarded reader who requires the learning techniques that only a clinic and a trained staff can provide, but if such a reader is discovered, you won't help him anyway and eventually he will have to be referred.)

But the assumption that the child can function at the spoken level is probably inaccurate. Many times the adult in his anxiety or impatience, functions for the child, and the child, through frustration or indolence, eventually gives up any attempt to function for himself at all. So the first task facing the teacher is to see that the child can handle adequately

the spoken word. Has the child mastered words for objects (concrete nouns)? Purely on a spoken basis, can the child label an object, use its proper plural? This is fairly simple to teach and the child should make rapid progress, not to mention the development of self-confidence and the rapport that begin at this stage. There might be some resentment to label-learning because it is "baby stuff" or "too easy" but tasks can be devised that will be acceptable to most students. Work with newspapers, maps, menus, record albums, cigarette packs, or traffic signs is usually sufficient to overcome reluctance.

Once basic labeling has caught on, the next step is to develop categoration skills-- discernment of likenesses and differences, concept development-- with the same materials. For example, the children determine that the Kent pack doesn't belong with the Winston packs.

After the child is at ease with words for objects, the teacher can begin working with pictures. These are easily obtained, and not only extend the range of spoken vocabulary but make it possible to introduce labels for actions (verbs), and labels for discrimination (adjectives and adverbs). By working with objects and pictures, the children are refining their oral language, communicating in complete sentences, acquiring control of variant forms of the words through speculation on the content and nature of the materials they are manipulating, and developing standard English through mutual assistance. (If I may digress, standard English is something we all had to learn, and a necessary reading skill. Initially, it may be necessary to tolerate shortcomings in English for the sake of the students' morale, but we do them a disservice when we imply that sub-standard English is the kind found in newspapers, magazines, schoolbooks, or the kind that the personnel supervisor is looking for when he is interviewing job applicants. People pay to laugh at the language of Moms Mabley or

Jimmie Durante, but they won't pay students who sound that way.)

In discussing objects, the students have been operating in the most fundamental comprehension area; that of definition. They have been asking who or what. They have probably been doing some quantitative and qualitative manipulation as well, dealing with such concepts as singular and plural, size, importance, and value. Such concepts can be developed as well with bottle caps as with scientific apparatus. When pictures are discussed, the concept of location in time and in space can be developed; the basic questions where and when. In almost any picture it is possible to find some clues that will reveal where the action is taking place, and when it is happening. Here again several sub-skills are developed. It may not be possible to locate an exact country, but at least it might be possible to isolate a region, or to eliminate certain places from consideration. Time may not be expressed to the precise year, but perhaps "recently" or "a long time ago" might apply. With refinement these can be developed into historical epochs such as "renaissance" or "the classical period" or "pre-historic," and the whole notion of chronological development can be established-- simply through working out words and meanings with the students. Even critical thinking skills might develop in some of the discussion and evaluation of aspects within the picture.

So far I have refrained from mentioning specifically words other than nouns, verbs, or modifiers, but there is a fourth category of words which will naturally be developed in conjunction with the activities mentioned above: the connecting words, prepositions and conjunctions. In the February issue of THE READING TEACHER, Dale Johnson compares the familiar Dolch Basic Sight Word List with a list derived from a computer analysis of representative types of reading material. In both lists, the top

two hundred words are mostly the little Anglo-Saxon words that we use to string together our thoughts. Because of their abstractness, some linguists call them "empty" words, but their function is far from desolate. It is these words that carry the burden of transforming language into communication, of moving it from what the word means to what the author means.

Up to now I have simply been presupposing oral discussion or conversation among our non-reading pupils, with reading and writing limited almost exclusively to labeling. The emphasis was on consolidating and extending the students' oral vocabularies, on speaking in sentences, and on acquiring a respect for inflections. Now the readers can learn a few words of their own from the Dolch or the Kucera-Francis or the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present Day Edited American English. Most of the words are short, and most are phonetically regular. Connecting words have no endings to complicate them, and thus are always the same in print. Hopefully by this time, at least some of the students will have developed enough curiosity to be willing to tolerate such artificial activities as listing all the one-letter, the two-letter, and the three-letter words in the English language.

It should be noted that no attempt has been made to "edit" the words used by the children. As far as they are concerned, they either know a word or they don't. There is no such thing as readability as far as they are concerned. Fifth-grade words and pre-primer words do not exist, even though many dissertations and basal readers owe their existence to the concept of a graded vocabulary. Is there any first-grader in this land who doesn't know the word "astronaut"? I mention this because now that we have discussed words about objects and words about pictures, we should devote some consideration to a third category, words about words.

It is here in the area of vocabulary development that oral and written communication become the masters of reality rather than merely the recording secretaries. By using an appropriate word, the speaker or writer transcends existence and location, and moves freely in the areas of deduction and creativity. He is asking how, so that he can make other ideas his own. If a child is guided to develop a vocabulary, his own thinking will become more precise, his learning more extensive, and his expression more lucid. In knowing the capabilities of language, he will more readily be able to detect deficiencies and be less subject to propaganda and fallacious thought. Finally, he will be able to understand even technical descriptions and operations, once he can isolate components, operations, and finished products.

Initially, this vocabulary development might come when a child stumbles over the nuance he needs to describe a certain mood or situation. He could then be directed to a reading passage where another author has had the same problem and has successfully solved it. From here it is a short step to developing independent reading, vocabulary enrichment, and creative writing. Though the step is short, it is none the less difficult. Great skill is required to avoid creating a dislike for reading at this point. But insistance on accuracy, precision, brevity, and promptness in speech; together with a development of appreciation for good communication and analysis of poor, pedantic, repetitive, or confusing writing for contrast, may lead to efficient use of the dictionary, thesaurus, and anthology. Letter-writing or diary-keeping might encourage creative writing. And as a final consequence, a student proficient in language becomes more facile in demanding to know <u>why</u> someone is speaking or writing to him. He will

seek motives behind the communication and be better equipped to learn from all communication-- good or bad, true or false.

What I have attempted to do here this afternoon is show that w d meaning can never be separated from phrase-meaning, sentence-meaning, paragraph-meaning or book-meaning. While the beginnings of word mastery come slowly and through limited experience with concrete objects at the spoken level, mastery of a simple skill makes possible the learning of a skill slightly more complex. And as a few skills become familiar, further dimensions of communication may be examined. As proficiency increases at one level, it can be guided into other aspects with ever-deepening insights resulting. We have stressed that, while at first it might be necessary to tolerate sub-standard communication, the goal should remain precise, lucid exchange and evaluation of ideas through speech and reading. And just as the teacher must tolerate deficiencies in early stages, so she should not reject accomplishments whose early arrival might disarrange a schedule or a class grouping.

Finally, it should have been evident that actual separation of communication into listening, speaking, reading, and writing is harmful to language development, however useful it might be to reading teachers. Gains in all areas should be sought, and gains in any area should be used to develop other gains.